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LESSON LEARNED

Exercise Evaluation: Communications for Control Staff

SUMMARY

During full-scale exercises, exercise control staff should be provided with a centralized communications network, such as hand-held radios. The selected communication system should have the following attributes: desired range of coverage, sustainable power, and ability to network all relevant personnel.

DESCRIPTION

On February 23, 2005, the Pierce County, Washington Terrorism Early Warning/Response Taskforce staged Cascade Resolve 05, a multi-agency, full-scale exercise. The exercise simulated multiple events on the Puyallup County Fairgrounds, including a large conventional explosion with a high number of casualties, structural damage resulting in trapped victims, chemical and radiological hazards, and multiple hostage-taking situations. The countywide exercise provided participating agencies with an opportunity to evaluate tactical, managerial, and investigative capabilities when responding to a series of terrorist attacks. Exercise objectives included demonstrating effective inter-agency communication of operational decisions, actions, and related information.

Exercise control staff, however, did not establish a centralized communication network to utilize during the exercise. Instead, control staff instructed exercise controllers to employ their individual cell phones for the purposes of exercise communication. Cell phones did not allow controllers to make real-time global announcements nor to address universal issues that arose during exercise play. As a result, exercise controllers assumed that messages and decisions eventually would be passed along to the appropriate people. This greatly impacted the timing of the exercise because the entire staff failed to receive critical information simultaneously. The exercise after-action report noted that the lack of a centralized communication network can pose a substantial security risk for exercise participants. Exercise control staff would have been unable to immediately stop all or part of an exercise had it been necessary to do so.

Exercise control staff should be provided with a centralized communications network, such as hand-held radios. In general, however, the selected communication system should have the following attributes: desired range of coverage, sustainable power, and ability to network all relevant personnel.

CITATION

Pierce County, Washington Department of Emergency Management. *Pierce County, Washington Exercise – Cascade Resolve 05: After Action Report and Improvement Plan*. Jun 2005.

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